

VZCZCXRO4768  
OO RUEHCN RUEHGH RUEHVC  
DE RUEHHK #1218/01 1830938  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 020938Z JUL 09  
FM AMCONSUL HONG KONG  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 7999  
INFO RUEHOO/CHINA POSTS COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HONG KONG 001218

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/CM; ALSO FOR DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/30/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [HK](#) [CH](#)

SUBJECT: HONG KONG JULY 1 MARCH: HEAT HALVES HOPED-FOR  
HUNDRED THOUSAND

REF: HONG KONG 1022

Classified By: Consul General Joe Donovan for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: Approximately 50,000 people took to the streets for Hong Kong's annual July 1 Democracy march, up from last year's claimed 47,000 but far short of the 100,000 many were anticipating. Scorching heat may have been a major deterrent. The march differed from 2008's panoply of causes in that the majority of participants were clearly marching specifically for democracy, or at least to express dissatisfaction with the Tsang administration. Other groups, including foreign workers, gays and lesbians, Falun Gong and environmental activists, had visible but token representation. Meanwhile, Chief Executive Tsang reversed at the last minute a controversial decision to join a competing march convened by local "patriotic" organizations.

12. (C) Comment: With the core message basically dissatisfaction with the Tsang Administration and a relatively vague call for greater democracy, the mandate this march's turnout has given to the pan-democrats in the coming debate on reforms for the 2012 elections is hard to gauge. Whereas 100,000 protesters would have captured greater international attention, they also might have spooked Beijing into taking a very cautious line on 2012. 50,000 may be enough to show strong interest in democracy without suggesting Tsang has lost control. We see two problems for the pan-democrats. First, their "everyone marches for democracy" line lets them claim support from everyone who showed up, but doesn't prove marchers endorsed a specific set of principles the pan-democrats can push for when the government rolls out its reform proposals. Second, while mandates (or, in the Tsang administration's case, their lack) matter in Hong Kong, it's not clear what, if anything, they mean to Beijing. Indeed, while the pan-democrats might score points locally by bashing Tsang, it's far from clear what they would gain by making Tsang look so bad Beijing replaced him, not least since none of those Beijing might put in his place are more sympathetic to democracy. End comment.

Last-Minute Reversal

13. (C) One of the key issues this year was a decision by Chief Executive Donald Tsang that he and some of his senior officials would join a portion of a competing march held by a coalition of "patriotic" organizations who annually commemorate Hong Kong's July 1, 1997, return to China. The coalition normally holds a gala in Hong Kong stadium, featuring performances by the People's Liberation Army and a range of local martial arts and community groups. The event also includes a march within the stadium, which then continues as a parade through Hong Kong. The Chief Executive, Central Government Liaison Office head and chief Ministry of Foreign Affairs representative normally attend as guests, but do not speak to the crowd and do not march. Media reports were imprecise and conflicting, but our

understanding was that this year Tsang planned to join the portion of the march held within the stadium. Pan-democrats were highly critical of the plan, which was seen as both a government snub to the democracy march and Tsang personally being willing only to go where he would be cheered. The administration reversed itself at the last minute, with media reporting on the morning of July 1 that Tsang would not march.

#### The Elusive Numbers Game

-----

¶4. (C) With estimates of the turnout for the annual June 4 vigil running to 150,000 (reftel), the organizers' goal for this march was 100,000. Media speculation fueled a widespread belief this figure was achievable, which in turn was reportedly making Beijing concerned about Hong Kong's stability. In a press conference June 29, pan-democrats seemed to be hedging, with the Civic Party's Ronny Tong arguing that the usual broad divergence between organizer, police and observer estimates made simple numbers of questionable value. In 2008, for example, organizers claimed 47,000, while police reported 15,000.

¶5. (C) This year, the Civil Human Rights Front claimed 76,000 participants. The police reported 27,000 as having gathered in Victoria Park prior to the march, a figure -- for that venue, at least -- which we regard as credible, although more people clearly joined the march en route. Legislators Lee Cheuk-yan and Fred Li estimated around 50,000 total participating in the march, while the Hong Kong University Public Opinion Project was quoted with a 29-33,000 range. Where one stood was significant. We watched the procession

HONG KONG 00001218 002 OF 002

pass from within the first third of the route. The steady flow of a dense crowd over three hours, fifteen minutes, leads us to support the 50,000 figure. Hong Kong Baptist University Professor Michael DeGolyer (protect), observing from near the end of the route, reported a steady flow for only two hours, leaving him with a figure of 35-40,000. The scorching heat may well have caused people to drop off the route, making a definitive figure hard come by.

¶6. (C) While the police have traditionally offered figures far lower than the organizers' estimates for pro-democracy marches, they seemed far more willing to accept organizer figures for patriotic marches. The parade organized by the "patriotic" coalition claimed a participation rate of 40,000. Police offered a corroborating figure of 39,000. A British colleague observed the initial part of the parade, while we observed the last half-hour. Density was far lower than that on the democracy march, and a figure of about half that reported might be more realistic.

#### A Range of Causes

-----

¶7. (C) In recent years, the "democracy" march has become a platform for nearly anyone with a grievance to vent, and thus serves mainly as a barometer of public satisfaction with the administration. The pan-democrats have nevertheless tried to claim all those who march, under the general rubric of "those who are complaining all feel the problem is rooted in an unrepresentative government." At their press conference June 29, the pan-democrats themselves put elections by universal suffrage on a list of several goals, along with livelihood issues, the rich-poor gap and good governance.

¶8. (C) Unlike last year, however, representation for causes other than democracy (and, presumably, discontent with the Tsang administration) seemed a minority. The second largest issue was clearly livelihood, with placards calling for the labor-endorsed minimum wage figure of HK\$33/hour. On that issue, a small group from Hong Kong's normally scrupulously apolitical civil servants made their march debut, complaining of recent wage reviews which they feel unfairly targeted them

for potential salary cuts. Representatives of other groups -- environment, Falun Gong, foreign workers, ethnic minorities, and gays and lesbians -- were visible but small.  
DONOVAN